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## THE RECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGION

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In the process of world readjustment incident to the war no department of man's life is likely to remain unaffected. Probably the more deeply we go into human nature, the more profound will be the reactions. On the surface the earth will not be the same. The scars which the Thirty Years' War left upon Europe have not yet been wholly effaced. Although the World War did not last as long, its far greater intensity and destructive force insure a vaster modification of outward nature. We already begin to see how powerfully government, society, and industry are to be affected. The whole order of life is being subjected to new pressures and set in new directions. The programme of education will have to be rearranged to meet the demands of a young manhood which has been tested ideally and practically as no other has ever been tested. Is it then likely that religion, that last resort of the human spirit, can hope to escape the challenge of the hour? To indicate certain tendencies which are already apparent and to point out the probable changes which they foreshadow — one can hardly hope to do more at this time — is the purpose of this article. It will have to do not merely with the attitude of the popular mind toward religion in general, but more particularly with the demand which it is likely to make upon the Church as the depositary and working instrument of religion.

Undoubtedly religion in the world in the future, as in the past, will continue to be dependent upon the

institution which mediates it to man. The fears or hopes of those who foresee the passing of the Church need not be taken too seriously. Any changes which are to come will best be indicated by reference to the Church, which will register them and give them expression. The Church, like man himself, has three sides, three departments of life — one intellectual, one spiritual, and a third which is merely bodily. Or, to put it another way, the Church is first a dogma, then it is a devotion, and finally it is a discipline. In all of these departments of its life it has been a development, changing from age to age with the evolution of the race. The modification, the growth, however, has been most marked in theology; and today it is possible to see a sort of culmination of the long course of doctrinal reconstruction which has been going on.

For a long time the process had to do with doctrines themselves, substituting new ones for old, or softening the rigors of those which were still retained. Then in New England at least, and measurably in other parts of the country, the change was indicated by the new lack of emphasis upon doctrine, an attitude which might be due to either greater breadth of view or lessening sense of the importance of theology. The significant fact is that through all these changes sectarianism has been little affected. The various denominations still maintain their respective enclosures and the force of their separate appeals. How this can be in the face of the modification and even of the discrediting of doctrine, is puzzling until we come to see the final effects of dogmas long held in common by groups of believers. That which is first held as a subscription, at last becomes a tradition, issuing in a habit of mind and an attitude of life. The creedal foundation still exists. As a corner-stone the dogma underlies the Church, but, like other corner-stones generally, it is buried out of sight. Once it was

much in evidence; today in the increasing multitude of new religions, interests, and demands it is seldom referred to. Once it was a finality, it was held as a fixture; now its relation to the Church's life is fluid, it is held in solution.

Out of the long reference to it as a logical foundation has sprung up at last a condition which we cannot better describe than by calling it atmospheric. This is indeed the last analysis of any common thought or action or life among men, and it may be felt as final in any home, in any school or business place. Habits and convictions which men hold in common issue at last in an atmosphere, to which the average person is far more susceptible than he is to the fine distinctions of dogmatic theology. We now mean more than a scheme of doctrines when we speak of Calvinism or Wesleyanism or Unitarianism; we have in mind a general attitude, a state of feeling, a temperature, in short, a climate of the soul which we find congenial or otherwise to our religious needs. When we enter a church, this atmosphere meets us; when we try to live and work in it, this is the condition which determines whether or not we feel at home. The air which seems native to us, in which we breathe most freely, decides our particular church-adherence far more than any personal understanding of or entering into doctrinal differences.

How many loyal and devoted members of any church-communion would be equal to the task of defining intelligently the dogmatic grounds upon which their loyalty rests? And yet this inability does not seem to affect either the loyalty or the devotion. The dogma still plays its part; it has created the atmosphere which has become the active agent in holding church-adherence. This is the only way that we can account for the startling revolutions which occasionally visit individuals and do so much to disrupt and sadden family life. The Unitarian boy goes away to college; and presently, to the bewilderment

of his parents, announces his intention of studying for the priesthood of the Roman Church. The explanation he would probably offer would be that a study of the doctrines of the Church had induced him to change his belief. The chances are, however, that the aggregate of all the influences which have gone into the making of the Church of Rome met the young impressionable mind in far subtler forms than that of ratiocination at the very doors of the Church itself. The spell was first woven about the spirit, the impulse of conformity was first awakened, and finally justification was sought for the desired step in a study of the doctrines. At the last analysis the Church itself becomes its own best teacher. Pressure of earlier environment does not always determine the type of mind; when it finds the environment which is native to it, the inevitable change becomes not so much a conversion as a reversion; and then the doctrinal readjustment becomes easy. This, to be sure, is not always the path of religious reconstruction, but there is reason to believe that it is by this more unconscious method that most cases of conversion are wrought.

A woman who had been brought up in a Calvinist church in a country town tells of a visit to New York City when she was eighteen years old. As a child she had sat in her pew and swung her feet in protest, although she could hardly have understood, much less reasoned about, what she heard. Being taken to a liberal church in the city, she declared that for the first time she felt the customary tension relax, and realized that she was now at home in a church, a conviction which never afterward left her. All that one service could do for a girl of eighteen would hardly account for such an experience unless it be that the doctrinal foundation of the churches has much more than a merely intellectual effect. At the last analysis we should probably find that church-allegiance is largely a feeling of restfulness, a sense of being

satisfied and at home in one church more than in another. However important we may hold the doctrinal basis of religion to be, we must remember that Christianity began in an impulse of faith and personal loyalty to Jesus which was so enthusiastic and compelling as to need no other justification. This exaltation of spirit, this new sense of security and happiness in the presence of a great spiritual discovery, was not reasoned or intellectualized either by teacher or by disciples. For two hundred years this joyous experience was enough. Then, as the ardor cooled, as the sense of divine nearness began to fade, came the need, which is first indicated in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus, of formulating the faith and basing it solidly on a foundation of dogma. A Christology became necessary only when devotion to Christ had begun to wane. Formal theology then took the place of prophecy. When the regenerative force of a free gospel had spent itself, there was nothing to do but to create the institution and buttress the Church upon doctrinal finality. But as time went on the burden of this fixity became increasingly unbearable, until in our own day we have seen the whole doctrinal structure undermined by either denial or indifference. This process seems likely to be accentuated by the war. The readjustment which is coming everywhere is emphasizing a new demand for simplification of Christian teaching and for unity and co-operation of Christian effort. Everywhere the barriers are being broken down. Men are coming together, learning to live and to die together. Race and nation have ceased to be dividing lines and boundaries. In the light of these new understandings and sympathies, what hope is there for a denominationalism founded upon difference of opinion? That men should differ is as necessary as ever, but the *credo* which divides is becoming more a working formula than a religious test; its divisiveness is only superficial; the deep currents of the religious life run

beneath it, and may have a common spiritual experience in spite of all differences of theological belief.

As the growing things of the earth obscure the soil from which they spring, so the obtrusion of doctrinal sources may mean the disturbance of vital processes of religious life. It will always be the business of the Church to condition religious emotion on the right sort of thinking; but the theology itself is not as important as the emotions it helps to create. Its final expression is an attitude and spirit. "When all theological systems have been reduced to a condition of fluidity and flux," writes Professor Andrew McPhail, "a universal church will formulate itself and all men will be drawn unto it for the sheer enjoyment of losing themselves in the Infinite. By the contemplation of heavenly things the transitory and perishable will seem of less importance than they now appear to be; and men will turn from them with hatred and full purpose to endeavor after a new obedience."

This sense of the transitory and perishable in much that passes for religion has been deepening in these days when the foundations of the earth are being broken up, and thought of serious things has begun to disturb our materialistic self-complacency. Much more has been happening than the bombardment of sacred cathedrals in the war which is bringing every dependence of the human spirit to the testing. More than even a new theology we need a new kind of theology, a theology which exists as a fertile soil for the genuine fruits of the spirit, a theology which shall bring all men together in a working brotherhood, however far apart they may be in their thinking. The best part of any dogma ought to be what it can do for those who cannot wholly accept it. There is enough of the Ritualist or the Puritan or the Liberal in religion in us all to make us glad and grateful for the churches which these represent, and even to allow us to profit by

their ministrations on occasion, if only they will have it so. The ideal mother is one who cares for her own, but is loved also by all the boys of the neighborhood, who feels an interest in all, and makes them all share in her motherhood. Mother Church is to become a neighborly and not merely a domestic reality. A boy does not think less of his own parents and his own home because he shares the kind offices of other boys' parents and homes. The very width and variety of these larger religious relationships is necessary to realize the ideal of motherliness in the Church. Nor does dogma offer any obstruction when we accept Professor Francis G. Peabody's definition of faith as a matter of consecration rather than of conformity, as a way of walking rather than a way of talking — "we *walk* by faith." The stress of great undertakings, the common sufferings and dangers which are welding men of different creeds and nationalities together, are preparing the way for this broad inclusiveness, this sense of an underlying brotherhood in all the differing sentiments of sects. The young men who are coming back from the war are bringing this new point of view with them. We read of the devout Catholic taking part in the Communion service in a Y. M. C. A. tent, and of the Protestant mingling with the Catholic soldiers at mass, of rabbi, priest, and minister indiscriminately sharing the offices for the dead upon the battlefield. Can any one doubt that this is to have effect in the years to come, even if the old lines of church-cleavage still hold? The attitude and spirit of Liberal religion are vindicating themselves to the world; and the question naturally comes, Why, with this immediate advantage, the Liberal Christian church may not more and more come to meet the religious needs of men? What better indication for the future could there be than a religious fellowship which holds its doctrinal contribution as only a part, and not the whole, of Christian teaching, and



which regards doctrine in general as a working method in religion rather than as a test of truth? If it were a question of theology only, the answer might be more easily reached. In the adjustments of the future, however, two other elements will have to be reckoned with — the element of worship and the element of discipline. Though it may *rest* securely on its doctrinal foundations, a church cannot work successfully, above all, it cannot advance and conquer, without a spirit to sustain it and a form to hold it together.

These last two demands of a working church have not been adequately met thus far by religious Liberalism. If, for instance, we take Unitarianism as an example, we find that on the side of worship it has not shown an emotional expression which corresponds with the strength and clarity of its thought. That it has in it the possibility of a deep spiritual experience is evidenced by its output of hymns which have been adopted into the hymnals of all the churches of Christendom, and which are acknowledged by all to have a peculiar depth and singing quality. The Roman Catholic, when he sings "Nearer, my God, to Thee," forgets its Unitarian origin, as does the Evangelical when he clinches his denunciation of Liberalism by using "In the Cross of Christ I glory," both Unitarian hymns. And yet, in spite of this individual expression, the fact remains that collectively the Unitarian Church has not yet evolved a devotional life which is at all comparable with its rational power. Its services have tended to be bare, and its hold upon its followers slight. To have clarified theology and to have enriched hymnology apparently is not enough. Something more is needed than merely to come together to reason about the things of the spirit. That which a true thinking about religion has liberated in the heart ought to have set the people to singing and to have created a worship which is both satisfying and compelling. A church must

first believe; it then must worship and work. Its truth has not fully come to power until it has been caught up into the surroundings, the forms, the expressions, which make it alive and operative. Its convictions must first convict itself before they can hope to convince others. Afraid as it is tempted to be of emotion, and suspicious as it is bound to be of discipline, the Unitarian Church has yet to face the fact that its characteristic differences have to do with only the bases of religion. The content of an effective working religion is always and everywhere the same. It must first and last *move* people; and the pathway of the motive is emotive. Without emotional power it will be feeble and aborted. The only question is, What kind of an emotion; by what law, from what foundation, does it proceed?

This is the great task of the free spirit everywhere, in civil and political as well as in religious life. Can the free spirit in man be depended on to foster the ideals which create the discipline of a true democracy? That spirit has been learning that it moves more freely as well as more effectively within the limits of self-restraint and corporate responsibility imposed from within; and will not the church have to share with the camp and the corporation the new insight? If liberalism in religion, with all its splendid fearlessness in thinking, with all its devotional depth in the individual, remains barren in concrete emotional expression and in responsible church loyalty, it cannot hope to inherit the future. A mere platform or forum for the discussion of God, duty, and destiny is not a church. A church is a worshipping body, and not a spirit merely which is detached and diffusive. With Unitarian character as good as it is, it would seem to be almost a crime to narrow or restrict the appeal which it makes. An active principle of goodness, thoroughly alert and benignly aggressive, spreading a contagion of gladness and service and hope through the world, would

seem to be the natural outcome of the individual health of mind and soul which underlies this church fellowship. What we actually find is that the instrument is neglected; the tree stands brave and beautiful, but it bears scanty fruits. Its success in segregated individuals, which is real, becomes relatively a failure through inability to organize its resources and to function widely.

The next step for the Church is to pass from the Higher Criticism, which has too long engaged its attention, to the Higher Creation which is now possible. Already a High Church party appears among the Unitarians, demanding a new appreciation of worship and a deepening of regard for the institution of religion itself. Admitting that the Church must be free, conceding the honorable place which intellect has in its councils, these younger men are pleading for beauty of expression, for a worship which is not only adequate, but which may be common to all. Reason is divisive. There can be no perfect unity, and hence little organic effectiveness, in the head. It is the heart which binds men together. In deeper feeling, in closer union, in that fuller symbolism which helps to create the one, and in that organization which helps to promote the other, lies the hope of the Church.

Whether or not this new party is to dominate the future of the Unitarian Church remains to be seen, but at least its rise at this time is significant. Especially is it significant in the fearlessness of its announcements and the fullness of its claims. Without surrendering any of the fruits of the age-long struggle for liberty of conscience, without any disparagement of the intellect or any lessening of respect for individualism, this party is prepared to go far in its demand for what it feels is a richer, fuller life. At a conference recently held in the Unitarian church in Birmingham, England, an attempt was made to crystallize this sentiment into action. The

purpose of the conference was to see if ways could not be devised for "reconciling the principles of individual and congregational liberty developed among the free churches with all that is essential to the life, faith, worship, and order of the Catholic (*i.e.*, the older, ritualistic) church." Sympathetic with this movement in England for a fuller liturgy and a more effective life, there is another in this country which is meditating innovations even more extreme. All of its members are committed to the idea of catholicity, and some of them go so far as seriously to consider the restoration, at least in modified form, of the mass.

Whatever may be one's personal attitude toward these proposals, there can be no question that the present order, or lack of order, is being challenged with demands which will somehow have to be met. It is a soldier, actually at the front in France, who takes us a step farther and who sees a "practical" Christianity only where the emphasis is laid on discipline. It may well be doubted if beauty of worship, important as it is, is our greatest need today. Certainly the emphasis on worship is sorely needed, but what is needed more is a rehabilitation of conscience which shall bring a new authority and a new obedience. "What would happen," writes this soldier, a Frenchman, "if we engaged in continual speculations regarding our military duties? As soldiers our task is to use our entire efforts in performing them. It is the same with our Christian duties; this is not the time for discussion but for prayer." The fact is that it is the emphasis on the institution of religion which leads naturally to the enrichment of its services, and which also tends to lend a greater sanction and authority to the Church. Spirit *and* discipline make up an army. They make up a church too. A spiritually-minded man is indeed spiritual in all his *ways*. He does not imagine that he is spiritual only when he thinks, or only when

he obeys the moral law out in the world. One of the *ways* of the Spirit, as well as one of the great Highways of life, is the practice of religion. To observe the laws of the Church, to obey its command, is to get that enlargement, that blessing of obedience to a Divine Government, which our young men are learning to get from obedience to a civil government.

Many things have been made clear to us in the years of our great world-testing, not the least of which is the modern need of a new imperative. To enthrone the categorical imperative of Kant in a church as unfettered as the free spirit in man, would be to do what has been done by American Democracy in the hour of its great trial. Freedom politically has shown itself capable of discipline. The Church, to be effective, must find the way to a new sense of responsibility, a new obedience. Individualism has undreamed-of potentialities, once the spirit is deeply aroused and the right sort of public opinion is created. In the war our citizenry has risen to a new civic consciousness which has supplied the needed compulsions. A national conscience has been born, and that too at a time when the individual conscience was supposed to have weakened. Probably never in the history of the world has so colossal and so splendid a moral awakening ever been witnessed. The Church did not create it directly, but it came out of the deeps which the Church has been preparing through all the years of its history. It was the new civic consciousness, the new public opinion, which called the new sense of responsibility into being.

The rehabilitation of conscience, not the reconstruction of theology, and not the beautifying of worship merely, is the greatest need of the Church today. To say that men are neglectful of religious duty because doctrine does not square with reason and science, or because the services of the Church are bare and unin-

viting, is superficial. These are good excuses; the real reason is that conscience has broken down, that in the distractions of life and the growing assumption of individual initiative and accountability by corporate action everywhere, the power of the Ought has weakened in the souls of men. Gradually men have come to feel about the Church as they have felt about the State, that they would get what they could from it in their hour of need and give to it as little as possible. Any attempts at moral militancy on its part, any assertion of claims upon its world constituency, are resented. And yet the possibilities of a new discipline are as latent in the Church as they have proved to be in the State; only the compulsions must come here also from within. They must develope from the new spirit, the new conscience, which an unfettered, democratic Church is best fitted to create.

Conscience — and yet what has the world not suffered in that sacred name! And how without prayer and fasting shall one dare to invoke that symbol by which humanity has been so often obstructed and enslaved? In the light of past experience it is not strange that men are reluctant to give obedience to religious authority, so much of the sin and indifference of men is to be laid at the door of this principle falsely applied. But the lesson of history must be relearned, and conscience must be seen in a new light. Leaving all the learned definitions, why not identify it simply with the sense of responsibility and give it the larger implications of social duty? Conscience which has indeed made cowards of us all, yes, and worse than cowards, community-slackers, social obstructors, must be taken from its narrower, personal definition and restated as the principle which conditions not only any common life, but also any individual development which is adequate to the needs of life. *My* conscience is what one so often hears about,

the *my* bulking larger in the mind of the Protestant than the conscience itself. Mark the perfect man, we are admonished, and behold the upright. But if in his effort to stand straight he leans so far as to fall backward, it will be difficult to mark his perfections, and obviously he cannot, when so prostrate, be called upright. The point to be noted is that unless one is first *up-right* he cannot hope to become *up-right*; so that the conscientious objector and the conscienceless rejector come out finally at the same place.

What we need is a new religious conscience to match the new civic, the new social, conscience which has of late found expression among us. Can the Church create this out of its own deepened life? Turning away from its disputations, and subordinating all forms of prettiness, can it concentrate all its energies upon the moral call to arms, upon the thought of service, not of itself, not even of others merely, but of that loyalty and devotion to religion itself, the higher, the more essential and enduring patriotism, which is presented to us consistently in the form and order of the living Church? Especially can the liberal church, free and unfettered, that democratic flower of the spirit, do this? If it can, there is hope for it and for humanity. It will be more difficult for any other to rise to the demand of the hour. The age is suffering for want of a new consciousness of God, and a new realization of His exigency in human affairs. God must be allowed to speak within us, as He spake of old, and the Voice must come to us objectively. Till conscience is enthroned again, it is useless to reconstruct theology or to enrich worship or to revive religion. The root of the matter resides in the will. A new motivation of religion is the crying need of the hour.